

Senate Education Committee

Testimony of Michael F. Tenbusch

In support of SB 620

September 27, 2011

Before I begin my testimony this morning, I'd like to share with you a few facts:

1. The average ACT score for high school students in Detroit Public High Schools is 15.2 (almost three full points less than what is considered the minimum score for success in a community college). The average ACT score for high schools students in Detroit's charter schools is...the same...15.2. We need a solution that is better than simply throwing more charter schools at it.
2. This score is consistent with ACT scores in cities across the state where more than 70% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. This is not just a Detroit problem. It's not just a Michigan problem. It's an American problem.

While serving on Detroit's school board in 2003 and 04, I learned a terrifying fact: we had 13,000 freshmen in our high schools, but less than 8,000 sophomores. We were losing a horrifying 5,000 young people a year to the streets.

To combat this, I helped lead a charter school district in Detroit that graduated more than 90% of its freshmen class in 2007. We had about 30 openings in our high school each year and hundreds of families applying to get their sons and daughters in. Part of my job was to protect the integrity of the lottery and the waiting list, and I often felt like St. Peter standing at the gates of heaven when I was actually just standing in the front office giving parents the harsh reality that their kids would not be getting in. For many kids, it was the difference between college and the streets, and their parents knew it. It was a heart-breaking job.

I did the math and realized it would take at least 30 years to solve this crisis by building 2 or 3 charter schools per year. We had to do something more.

Two years ago, national scholars identified 2,000 schools nationwide that had senior classes less than 60% of the size of their freshmen classes for three or more years running. The scholars referred to these schools as "dropout factories." Seventy-three of these dropout factories were in Michigan, 30 of which were in Southeastern Michigan – 20 in Detroit and 10 in our suburbs. General Colin Powell went on the talk show circuit to highlight the scandal of this silent epidemic—and he seemed to say on every show that Detroit had the worst dropout rates in the nation.

Thank God our Board had finally had enough. Shortly after General Powell's speech tour ended, our Board of Directors set a ten-year goal to turn around or shut down all 30 high schools named in this report. It was a bold goal, and one in which almost no one outside of the Board believed could be done.

To accomplish that goal, we invited the teachers, principals, board members and administrators of the 30 schools known as dropout factories to attend a Dropout Prevention Summit. We heard from school leaders in cities like Boston, Chicago and Miami Dade about the strategies that have proven successful in dramatically improving student achievement. Within three months, we raised \$4 million from the Skillman Foundation, AT&T, and our donors at the United Way to launch the Turnaround Challenge. Turnaround means that schools will move from graduation rates of less than 60% to higher than 80%, starting with the projected graduation rates of this years' freshmen class. Schools could only qualify if they committed to strong site-based management, partnering with a turnaround organization, and working within a network of schools to focus on the same data for on-track indicators of success.

All 30 schools were invited to a workshop to meet and choose turnaround partners, and to apply for funding for whole school turnaround. When we launched the Turnaround Workshop in August of 2008, I asked a roomful of 50 teachers the following question:

"How many of you believe, that with bold and dramatic changes, your school can achieve graduation rates of 80% or higher? Less than ten people raised their hands. Stunned, I asked the question again.

"How many of you believe, that with bold and dramatic changes, your school can achieve graduation rates of 80% or higher?

One or two more hands went up. Even at a volunteer workshop on turnaround with real life examples all around, our teachers did not believe that their schools could be turned around. It's a belief that would be played out over and over again among funders, policy-makers and ed reform experts. "Just shut 'em down, Tenbusch....We've just got to start over...There's nothing you can do." Became a mantra, but the people who ended up leading and teaching in our schools had a different belief.

Eleven of those 30 schools applied, and the following five were funded:

- Cody and Osborn High School in Detroit
- Melvindale High School
- Pontiac High School
- Van Dyke Lincoln in Warren

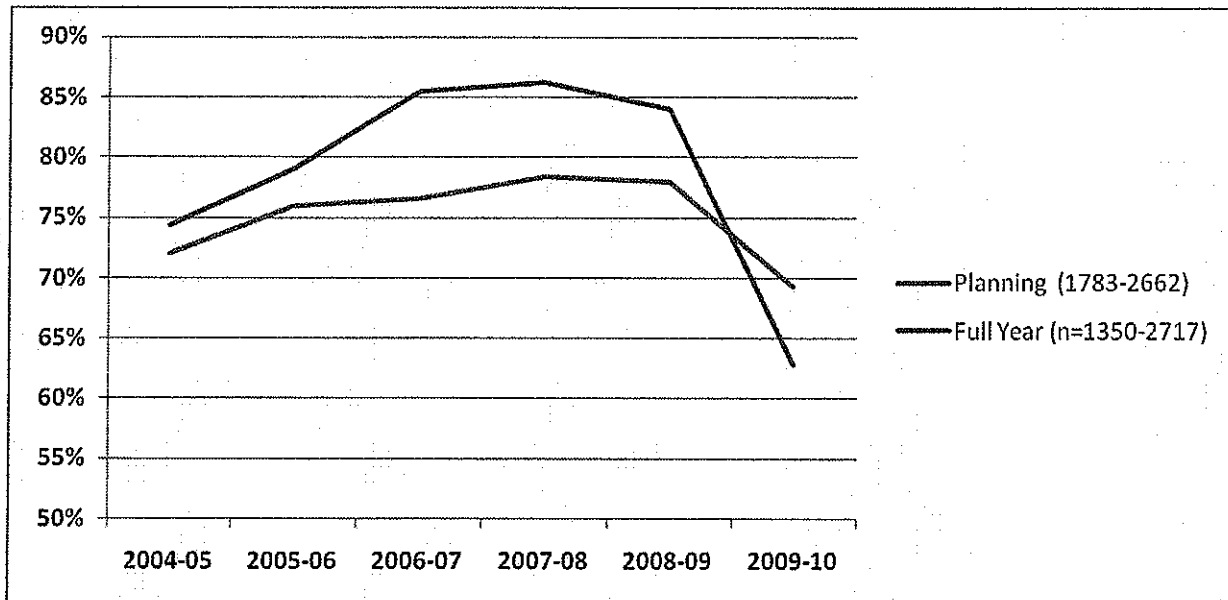
After a year of intense planning and professional development, those schools opened this past September as completely different entities than those that existed for decades before. As an example, there is no longer a Cody High School, or an Osborn High School, in Detroit. Instead, there are nine small schools on those two campuses. Nine small schools:

- Each with its own principal
- Each of whom is supposed to be able to hire his or her own teaching staff
- Each built on an "advisory" system, in which teachers serve as advisors to the same group of 20 students and are responsible for getting them from freshmen orientation in high school to freshmen orientation in college.

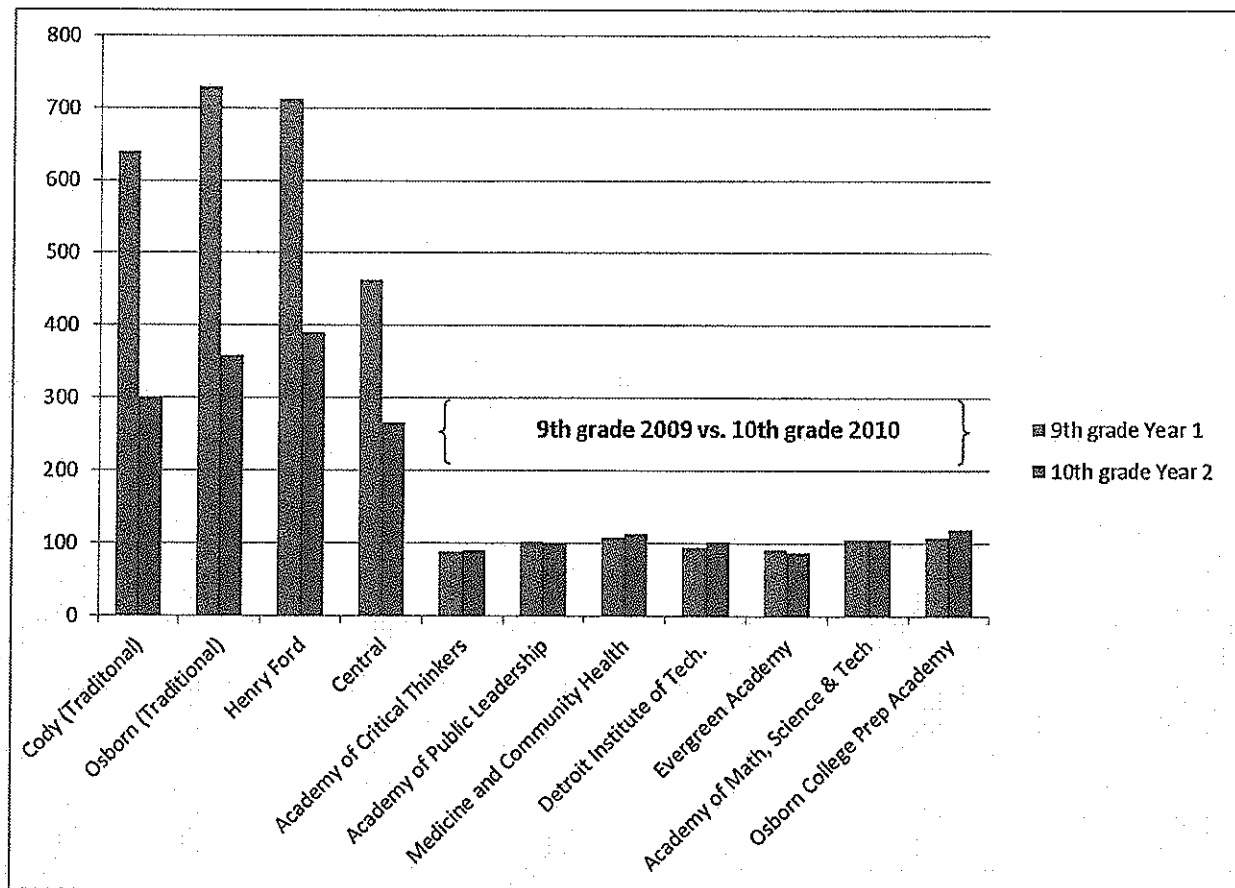
Because of the small size, principals know every student in their building by name, and teachers know the cell phone number of the students, and their parents, in their advisories.

From the planning year to their first year of implementation, the schools had been through three superintendents, but the focus on the mission and their partnership with a turnaround partner and the United Way never wavered. By the end of the first year, only one of the original nine principals remained a principal in his school. One asked for a transfer, one went to a charter school, one went to a suburban school, and five were reassigned. And yet, the vision and the partnerships never wavered. Because of that unwavering commitment to the plan, the schools were able to change the arc of a decades long trend that has ravished our communities. In that first year, the schools cut the number of chronically truant students by a quarter.

Students with more than 20 absences in the turnaround schools are denoted in red:



Even more dramatically, we abolished the awful drop off in which half the kids were leaving school after their freshmen year. Traditionally, less than half the freshmen at Cody and Osborn High School returned for their sophomore year. Last year, the sophomore class at the small schools at Cody and Osborn were 103% the size of the freshmen class, meaning that not only did almost all of the students come back but kids from other schools were coming too.



Last fall, General Motors North American president, Mark Reuss, looked at these results and visited these schools and became a believer. GM made a \$25 million commitment to the work, and this past spring, seven schools joined a second network of schools committed to meet the challenge of graduating at least 80% of this year's freshmen class in the spring of 2015. Mr. Reuss believes that Michigan can turn around, just as GM did, but not without a better educational system.

Of the 30 schools that were on the original list of dropout factories in 2008, ten have been closed, and twelve of the remaining 20 are now on the path for success. In less than four years, we have changed the belief around what can be done in our high schools, with demonstrable results.

You would think that with results like this, there would be a groundswell of support from the school system to protect and support the great work that is happening. Yet challenges remain. Two weeks before school started this fall, it was still not clear which teachers would be returning to these schools or which teachers would be placed into it. Teachers were placed shortly before school opened—but without the consent of the principals, a commitment to the culture of the small schools, or any training in the model.

To make matters worse, the school facility at the Osborn campus is slated to be closed this year because of a leaky roof and water damage throughout the building. You may be aware from the newspapers over the last few months that the neighborhoods surrounding Osborn are some of the most dangerous

in the city. How much worse will that become if we take out the small schools that are just beginning to transform the culture of education at the root of the problem?

To be in this position halfway to graduating at least 80% of the our first freshmen class is equivalent to the Detroit Lions getting off to an 8 and 0 start, only to have the NFL swap out some of their players in the middle of the season and threaten to shut down Ford Field after four more games.

This does not happen when school leadership teams are empowered to make the best decisions for their kids. This is the foundation that the Education Achievement System is built on, and we look forward to working with Mr. Covington to make sure this is done successfully. We also believe the Detroit Public Schools and the other districts with which we partner share this commitment to strong, site-based decion-making, and we will continue to partner with them to strengthen our results.

However, if districts are not being responsive to the needs of their school, the parents and the teachers who make up those schools should have the option to choose what they believe is a better service provider. If those instances occur with the schools in which we partner, we believe that Senate Bill 620 provides reasonable options for parents and teachers to become more empowered in the future of their school and students, and so we support this bill. We think it is an important tool to help parents and teachers become the authors, not the victims of their fate.